China Perspectives

2018/3 | 2018
Twenty Years After: Hong Kong's Changes and Challenges under China's Rule

Nicolai Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965*,

New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, 304 pp.

Krista Van Fleit

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/8284
ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher
Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

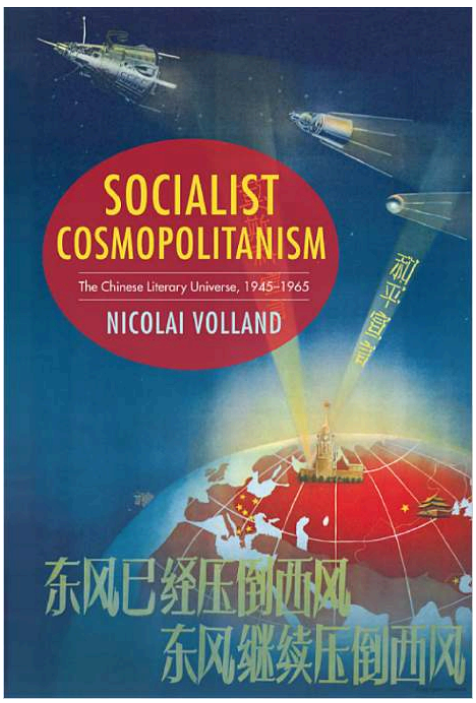
Printed version
Date of publication: 1 September 2018
Number of pages: 85-87
ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference
Krista Van Fleit, « Nicolai Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965*, », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2018/3 | 2018, Online since 01 September 2018, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/8284

Nicolai Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965*,

New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, 304 pp.

Krista Van Fleit



1 The past decade has seen a marked increase in English language studies of literature produced in China's Maoist period (1949-1976). A body of work that was once seen by many scholars writing in English as simply propaganda and communist brainwashing is finally being approached with a new perspective that allows readers to appreciate the complexities of Maoist cultural production and a new understanding of the richness of the texts produced during that time. This reappraisal began with scholars writing about the Maoist period in relation to other periods in Chinese literature, and then transitioned into books with a sole focus on the Maoist period. Whereas these studies often found meaning in Chinese communist literature by pointing to the native or the local in communist literary production, Nicolai Volland, in his excellent new study of the 1950s entitled *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965*, uses the framework of world literature to

show that Chinese socialist literature was part of the transnational creation of global socialist culture. His book is a challenge to the national literature centred framework of Chinese cultural studies, and importantly, a corrective to a concept of world literature that sees the West as the centre and often excludes global socialist culture, arguing that "socialist literature is always already world literature" (p. 15).

2 Volland uses two separate yet related concepts to rethink socialist/ Chinese literature: world literature and cosmopolitanism. He argues that the universalist, Eurocentric concept of cosmopolitanism needs to be replaced with a conceptual approach that "sees transnational experiences and attitudes as particularistic rather than universal, and exclusive rather than inclusive, as situated and located in concrete texts" (p. 10). Both concepts allow him to connect the 1950s to other moments in the Chinese twentieth century by looking outward instead, as others have done, of looking to other aspects of Chinese literary tradition.

3 The study is organised in six main content chapters that illuminate four broad areas of the transnational exchange. First, Volland discusses exchanges between people by examining cultural diplomacy in the 1950s. He next discusses the translation of socialist realist practice in Asia by looking at how Asian authors used Soviet models to create their own land reform novels and industrial fiction. Thirdly, he looks at direct translations of Soviet literature, science fiction, and children's literature to show how they expanded the horizons of Chinese socialist literature. Finally, he turns to the exchange of texts and the creation of world literature on the pages of *Yiwen*, an important journal devoted to the translation of foreign literature, later renamed *World Literature*. The brief conclusion situates the study in the whole of modern Chinese literature, arguing that "socialist cosmopolitanism, hence, emerges as but one distinct link in the larger cosmopolitan project that spans China's long twentieth century" (p. 189).

4 The first chapter shows how cultural exchanges transformed from primarily private to primarily state level exchanges in the 1950s, using the travels of Feng Zhi as a case study. By focusing on the travels of one author, Volland narrates an engaging story while also illuminating an important change in the cultural landscape of the 1950s. Next, the study turns to the land reform novel and argues that the interplay of different versions of socialist realist master narratives, in this case that of Mikhail Sholokov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*, "shapes the worldiness of literature in the socialist bloc" (p. 41). Volland reads two land reform novels from Northeast Asia, Zhou Libo's *Hurricane* and Yi Ki-yong's *Land*, as transculturations of Sholokov's epic novel. He argues that situating land reform novels in a transcultural perspective challenges the accepted ideas of canonical Chinese socialist literature by defining socialist literature not simply along national borders but rather in terms of a socialist cosmopolitanism that opens up the understanding of ideas such as land reform when read alongside Soviet counterparts. Volland

then extends this idea of transculturality and changing methodology to the study of working class fiction, or lack thereof, in China with a reading of Cao Ming's work in the context of both China's desire to win a Stalin Prize and the contours of working class fiction. Again, reference to Soviet industrial fiction illuminates the project in China, expanding our understanding. "The foremost model of Soviet industrial fiction had thus entered the Chinese literary orbit at an early date, and its prominence increased once the CCP advanced toward victory, promising to build a new state led by workers and peasants. *Cement* offered a blueprint for the new Chinese genre of industrial fiction" (p. 72). These four chapters engage with different aspects of Volland's concept of world literature, namely the global exchange of texts and the worldliness that is contained in a text.

5 The next two chapters turn to texts that have traditionally been excluded from the canon: science fiction and children's literature. In these two chapters Volland discusses at length the process of translation and introduction to the Chinese reading public of two bodies of literature popular in the Soviet Union. In rich detail he argues that translations of Soviet science fiction provided China with models to envision the future, and he finishes the chapter by arguing that imported popular fiction such as Soviet science fiction made up for the loss of popular literature such as detective novels, romantic fiction, and martial arts novels that ceased to be published after 1949. I do think that this argument is the other side of the coin to an argument that I make in my book,[1] namely that the establishment of people's literature as state popular culture also accounted for the transformation (not necessarily loss) of such popular fiction. Instead of seeing the Chinese literary field as primarily importing foreign popular literature to fill a gap, I think it is important to focus on the rewriting of national popular culture into genres such as that identified by Li Yang as "revolutionary popular novels." In the chapter on children's literature, Volland uses the abridgement and revision of the popular Soviet children's novel *The Story of Zoya and Shura* to discuss in greater depth an issue that I wondered about throughout the book: how did Chinese authors, editors, and translators reinterpret the literature they introduced?

6 Finally, the last content chapter takes the idea of cultural networks from interpersonal exchange and cultural diplomacy through the travels of individual authors to the translation and introduction of texts into China with a reading of the journal *Yiwen*. Whereas Paola Iovene's recent study of *Yiwen*[2] discusses the temporality of the concept of world literature developed on the pages of the journal, Volland interprets the content of the journal and the choice of editors spatially, arguing that the journal served as a map of world literature from the Chinese perspective. He argues that there are four concentric circles or zones created in the literary map of *Yiwen*: the Soviet Union is the centre, followed by the socialist nations of Eastern Europe and East Asia; coming after this we see third world countries, and finally the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States. This chapter is a fascinating

rebuttal to theories of world literature that privilege European Modernist writing as world literature, and shows how China redefines this map and also the complex process of situating China on the map.

7 Volland's book reinserts "worldliness" into the study of Chinese literature of the 1940s and 1950s. In the introduction he applauds the effort of scholars in both China and the US who have been rethinking the literature of the 1950s, but he argues that they (we) have had an inward focus that *Socialist Cosmopolitanism* corrects. The book certainly does make that correction by showing the many ways writers during the 1950s were engaged in the creation of world literature and reframing our understanding of the 1950s as a socialist cosmopolitanism that links the periods of literary cosmopolitanism seen in China's May Fourth and New Era literature. This approach is an important and welcome challenge to any concept of world literature that would ignore the socialist bloc. One wonders, however, if the focus on Soviet-led cosmopolitism at times impedes our understanding of what was happening on the ground in China. Volland refers only very minimally to Mao's Yan'an talks, and never refers to culture produced in the 1950s as Maoist. An approach that takes better account of native Chinese practice, while simultaneously inserting it into the framework of socialist cosmopolitanism, might result in a richer understanding of the period. That approach might also help to decentre the USSR, which at times reads like a substitute for "Europe" or "the West" as the centre of world literature. Referring to the novel *Cement* as providing the blueprint for Chinese industrial fiction, arguing that the translations of Soviet science fiction provided a horizon for Chinese understandings of the future, and discussing the journal *Yiwen* as presenting the Soviet Union as "zone one: the centre," tends to reify the concept of a USSR-led literary global socialism. It is of course true that, as Volland so eloquently writes, Soviet literature often provided models for Chinese literature, but precisely because Volland does not adequately consider studies of the local in the production of Maoist literature, he seems to overcorrect an earlier elision of Soviet influence. Finally, Volland does not discuss in detail the Cultural Revolution or post Sino-Soviet split, which is understandable in this short study, but the Third World solidarity developed in the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution may also provide a perspective for a richer understanding of China's place on the map of world literature. Even taking into account these concerns, the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of both modern Chinese literature and global socialist culture, and is written in an extremely accessible voice that makes it a genuine pleasure to read.

NOTES

1. Krista Van Fleit, *Literature the People Love, Reading Chinese texts from the early Maoist period (1949-1966)*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
2. Paola Iovene, *Tales of Future Past, Anticipation and the Ends of Literature in Contemporary China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014.

AUTHOR

KRISTA VAN FLEIT

Krista Van Fleit is Associate Professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures of the University of South Carolina (VANFLEIT@mailbox.sc.edu).